Family Centered Approaches for Adolescent Sexual Offenders and Their Families

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Sexual offending is a social problem that has consequences for victims, families, and society (Levenson & Morin, 2006). People often consider the home as a place where adolescents pick up abusive behaviours, for example the current research literature suggests that there is a significant correlation between exposure to sexual abuse in childhood and sexual offending behaviours in adolescence (Hendriks & Bijleveld, 2004; Johnson, 1988; Starzyk & Marshall, 2003). This may be due to the fact that children learn through observation; therefore the direct exposure to inappropriate sexual behaviours becomes a part of their learned behavior (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, childhood environment acts as a risk factor, individual choices also play a role (Rueter & Conger, 1998). Parental influence can act as a risk factor for adolescent sexual offending behaviours when parents are inconsistent, lack warmth, are physically or sexually abusive and exhibit harsh disciplinary procedures (Rueter & Conger). The converse also appears to be true. Parents who are positive, involved, and active in the lives of their children, appear to be a mitigating factor for any acting out behavior, including sexual abuse.

Current research literature reflects that parenting style, parent-child interactions, presence of abuse, support, involvement, and role modeling have all been found to have a significant impact on child development (Barber, Olsen, & Shagel, 1994; Bradford Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993; Neiderhiser, Reiss, Olomin, & Hetherington, 1999). Rueter and Conger (1998) stated that there is a bi-directional influence between parents and children that can either create a negative or a positive cycle of communication within the home environment. A negative cycle precipitates secrets and a lack of communication. A positive cycle can facilitate open and honest dialogue within the family unit. Therefore the use of family-based interventions helps to not only help the adolescent sexual offender, but also the family members that may
experience negative consequences associated with having a child or sibling who sexually
offends. Not only do family-based interventions provide treatment to the family system and
dynamics between members, but they are also effective in helping families work through issues
together, as opposed to providing individual counselling to each family member (Fals-Steward,
Yates, & Klostermann, 2005).

Familial-based interventions have been found to be one of the most economical
approaches to treating adolescent sexual offenders (Fals-Stewart et al., 2005). Due to the fact that
some families are limited financially or health care providers limit the number of sessions that
can be accessed, a family-based approach allows for maximum benefit of therapy to a larger
number of individuals (Fals-Stewart et al.). The ability to treat multiple family members
simultaneously allows therapists to determine where problems stem from, what changes need to
be made, and what needs to be in place in order to reduce the likelihood of a relapse in sexually
intrusive behaviours (Fals-Stewart et al.). While not all adolescents engage in incestuous
behaviours, for those who do it can be helpful to look at the power dynamics within the family in
order for behaviour therapists to better treat incest in families, and prevent the cycle of abuse
that the focus family therapy places on family interactions, rules, and boundaries works to
counter the forces of secrecy, coercion, and intimidation that are commonly found in families
with adolescent sexual offenders, and also helps to restore justice within the family unit.

Another mode of therapy that is commonly used in the treatment of adolescent sexual
offenders is multi-family group therapy. This approach works to provide family members
(siblings, parents) with enhanced knowledge, skills, support, and treatment attitudes through the
use of psychoeducation (Nahum & Brewer, 2004). Multi-family group therapy provides a
number of benefits to those who are involved; this therapy encourages family members to support each other through the counselling process, while also providing the possibility of receiving additional support from other group members who have gone through similar experiences within their own family, thereby allowing new members of the group the opportunity to learn from those who have been in therapy longer.

Family therapy and multi-family group therapy not only helps to change family dynamics, but also helps to support each member who has been negatively impacted by having a sexual offender in the family (Nahum & Brewer, 2004). Since sexual abuse impacts the lives of not only the victim and the offender, but also their families it is important for therapists to work with the family members who have been impacted by the offense, as this approach supports the goal of providing support to non-offending family members (Nahum & Brewer). Moreover, it is important for therapists to focus on not only the problems experienced by the offender and the victim, but also the problems that other family members experience as a result of their association with the offender or the victim.

Problem Statement

Adolescence is a stage of transition that requires exploration into autonomy, roles, values, and intended life paths (Broderick & Blewitt, 2006). While current research literature suggests that adolescents begin to value the opinions, values, and beliefs of their friends during their quest for autonomy, it also suggests that familial influence continues to influence decision-making processes throughout the adolescent years (Bradford Brown et al., 1993; Kim & Goto, 2000). Furthermore, researchers have found that parental involvement is highly correlated with the onset and treatment of delinquent behaviours in adolescence, as the most successful treatment outcomes occur when familial involvement is present throughout the therapeutic process (Barber

The proposed research project will be guided by the following problem statement: How can familial involvement impact the development and treatment of adolescent sexual offenders? The questions that will be used to guide the research and analysis for this project are (a) what familial risk factors are associated with adolescent sexual offending, (b) what familial mediating factors are associated with adolescent sexual offending behaviours, (c) how can family centered care be applied to the treatment of adolescent sexual offenders and their families, and (d) how can psychoeducational groups influence the treatment of adolescent sexual offenders and their families.

The goal of this project is to learn more about the correlations between familial involvement and adolescent sexually intrusive behaviours. Specifically, learning how familial involvement can help with the treatment process, reduce the incidence of relapse, and prevent the cycle of abuse from continuing in future generations.

This research project is guided by the idea that there are multiple realities that are shaped by individual, historical, and situational factors (Wong-Wylie, n.d.a). Specifically, emphasis is placed on the way that these factors relate to the oppression of victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse. Due to the stigmas attached to sexual abuse, it is extremely important for researchers to be mindful of how difficult it can be for individuals to disclose incredibly personal information, therefore some research participants may not fully disclose the sexual abuse that has occurred by the sexual offender. Qualitative and quantitative research are both helpful in addressing treatment effects, common risk and mediating factors, as well as understanding common
reactions to sexual assault. Therefore, research studies using either method of research design will be incorporated into the intended literature review.

Project Rationale

Sexually abuse is a violation that is hard to overcome, not only for the victim, but also for the family of the offender (Jonson-Reid & Way, 2001). The incidence of sexual abuse committed by adolescents is on the rise in North America with the rate increasing by 50% in the 1990’s (Jonson-Reid & Way). The research does not indicate whether the increase is due to an actual increase in perpetration, or rather an increase in reporting rates. Sexual abuse has an impact on the entire family, therefore it is important to help family members deal with traumatic event, and also provide treatment to the sexual offender in order to minimize the possibility of future offences (Jonson-Reid & Way). Further research into group counselling as a therapeutic approach for families of sexually intrusive youth could help to understand the commonalities experienced between families. This research could further help in understanding common family characteristics that are present in families seeking counselling, characteristics of families who are successful in group and family counselling, as well as the impact that these approaches have on the offender in addition to the individual family members.

Attention will be placed on reviewing the most effective techniques in conducting family and group therapy with this population. A review of the current research literature will help to bridge the gaps found in individual research studies and will help in determining the approaches that are found to be most effective. This research project will promote greater understanding into familial experiences around adolescent sexual offending, the process of family centered and group therapy as it relates to adolescent sexual offending, and the outcomes that the current research literature has associated with family therapy and multi-family group therapy. As many
studies in this area have focused on small sample sizes, a look into numerous studies will help to generalize the findings across the population of adolescent sexual offenders and their families. Families have been found to be the key to successful treatment of adolescent sexual offenders (Price; Kolko et al., 2004). By disclosing the events of sexual abuse to the broader context of the family unit, therapy can counter the forces of secrecy, coercion, and intimidation. By working together families can serve as a foundation for empathy and forgiveness and develop safety plans against further occurrences of abuse (Price, 2004).

Research Project Procedures

The proposed research project will involve a comprehensive review and critical analysis of the primary, peer-reviewed research literature surrounding the treatment of adolescent sexual offenders and their families. The intention is for this project to discuss the application of family based therapeutic processes to families who have experienced the ramifications of sexual abuse. I will consult with my final project supervisor in order to determine who the experts are in this specific area so that I can make sure to incorporate their research findings into the literature review. Due to the fact that there will be no human subjects required for this project there will be no need to submit ethics approval forms to the Graduate Center of Applied Psychology.

My next step in the completion of this project will be to use my predetermined research problem and questions to guide my research of the current research literature. These questions will serve as an outline for writing the actual literature review. My intention is to use the following research databases: (a) Academic Search Premier, (b) PsycInfo, (c) Ebscohost, and (d) Science Direct. In addition, I will also look for recent publications from prominent psychologists working in the field of treatment for sexual offenders. Most notably, I will review the work of Gail Ryan who has been a leader in the development of treatment programs for adolescent sexual
offenders in the United States. Throughout this process I will continue to be in contact with my supervisor via email in order to receive continued guidance and support. Specifically, guidance that will enable me recognize areas that I have yet to cover, authors that should be mentioned, and technical guidance for the actual writing of the project.

Once the research has been completed I will design a detailed outline and organize the information accumulated from the research into this outline. From this outline the first draft of the literature review will be written. I will work with my supervisor throughout the process in order to incorporate further details, research, and editing. I intend to complete this project over the course of a year and believe that this is a realistic expectation. I adjusted my program plan for academic course work and will therefore not be enrolled in any courses over the spring/summer semester. Thus, I will be able to focus my attention on this project.

Potential Implications of the Project

Who Will Benefit

The intended literature review will help to provide information for novice practitioners who are, or will be, working with the population of adolescent sexual offenders and their families. The literature review could also serve as a resource for families who are currently experiencing the repercussions of sexual abuse and could help families in the identification of risk factors, mediating factors, and effective treatment methods that are currently used to combat the continuing cycle of abuse. Furthermore, this review will also help to educate parents to identify risk factors that are currently impacting their children, thereby reducing the risk of children developing sexually intrusive behaviours, and preventing abuse before it starts. This literature review will help to educate therapists on the common factors that contribute to the incidence of sexual abuse, what can be done to prevent it, and what the most effective
therapeutic techniques entail; thus, increasing counselling success rates and decreasing the incidence of a further sexual perpetration. In order to accommodate a variety of different audiences, including parents of youth who have sexually offended, this project will be written using academic language that will be easy to understand by both experienced and novice practitioners, as well as parents who have not completed post-secondary education.

Implication for Future Research

As the counselling profession is always evolving there are new counsellors emerging from schools every year, it is necessary for future research to explore new counselling techniques that could benefit the sexual perpetrators and their families. This project is intended to provide novice counsellors with information surrounding best counselling practices for sexual offenders and their families. Furthermore, continued research in this field will help practitioners provide the best care possible for their clients, and will help to decrease the rates of sexual perpetration in our society.

Summary

Familial influence can act as a risk or mediating factor when it comes to adolescents developing sexually intrusive behaviours. While peers become incredibly important during adolescent years, the current research literature suggests that parents have a stronger influence, especially when looking at the development of values (Barber et al., 1994; Bradford Brown et al., 1993). Due to the fact that sexual abuse impacts victims, perpetrators, as well as the families of both, it is important for therapists to work with families in order to prevent further abuse, work through trauma, and rebuild healthy familial relationships (Kolko, Noel, Thomas, & Torres, 2004). This research project will address the importance of family involvement in the prevention and treatment of sexual abuse. Specifically looking at how families can help
adolescent sexual offenders develop relapse prevention plans, work to determine the triggers that are correlated with sexual perpetration, and how they can work together to heal. This literature review is intended to provide information for professionals working with the population of adolescent sexual offenders and their families. It will help to educate and provide effective techniques for therapeutic treatment. This final project will work to inform families, counsellors, and other professionals about the seriousness of sexual abuse and the importance of early intervention.
References


